DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 387 102 IR 017 319

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TITLE "Mooving" to a Virtual Curriculum.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 11p.; In: Association of Small Computer Users in Education (ASCUE) Summer Conference. Proceedings (28th, North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, June 18-22, 1995); see IR 017 305.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Uses in Education; Curriculum Development; Educational Media; Higher Education; Teaching Methods; Undergraduate Students; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS Internet; MOOs; University of Missouri; Virtual Classrooms; *Virtual Reality

ABSTRACT

Three writing classes at the University of Missouri (freshman, sophomore, and senior) spent much or most of the semester on the virtual campus of the Diversity University (DU) MOO (multi-user object oriented). The freshman class wrote one paper on Internet exploration, another on their favorite Internet destination, and for the third were given a choice of researching a potential employer, and writing a resume and cover letter, or building a virtual space at DU MOO. The sophomore class wrote three papers on textual reality--one based on words shaping their personal experience, one on the worlds made of words on the Internet, and one comparing either of those to the realities shaped by words in Leslie Silko's novel, "Ceremony." The senior class had two projects: a "real-life" essay describing any aspect of virtual reality, and a virtual construction imitating any object chosen from "real life." Several logistical problems associated with the senior class are examined. The development of a virtual mural by the sophomore class is explored in detail. It is believed that the freshman class, offered the least amount of instructor guidance, learned the most. It is concluded that the experiences at the University of Missouri leave no doubt about the viability of MOO environments for composition instruction. MOOs provide teachers with a powerful new medium for class discussion, text production, and publication. To make the best use of this medium, classes need regular access, teachers familiar with MOO programming, and willing students. Two appendices provide the senior course description and excerpts from the DU MOO written by University of Missouri students. (MAS)

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ED 387 102

Mooving to a Virtual Curriculum

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I taught three writing classes this past fall–freshman, sophomore, and senior–at the University of Missouri - Kansas City. But all three classes spent much or most of the semester on the virtual campus of–although not in the classrooms of–Diversity University Moo. The moo in that name stands for "multi-user object oriented." DU Moo is an Internet accessible, computer-based, virtual-reality program in which students and teachers may engage in on-line, computer-mediated discussions and co-operatively compose interactive textual constructions. It is both less complicated and more wonderful than it sounds.

The 110 class wrote one paper on Internet exploration (find three things to explore and describe them), wrote another on their favorite Internet destination (describe how a new user could get the most from it; LambdaMoo getting the most attention here), and for their third papers had a choice: apply for a RL (Internet-ese for "real-life) job (ie: research a potential employer, write a cover letter, write a resume) or build your own virtual space at DU Moo.

The 225 class wrote three papers on textual reality–one based on words shaping their personal experience, one on the worlds made of words on the Internet, and one comparing either of those to the realities shaped by words in Leslie Silko's novel, *Ceremony*. Additionally, they collaborated, in groups and as a class, in the virtual painting of a text-only mural for DU Moo's Minority Studies Hall.

The 403 class, "Writing in a Cultural Context," had only two projects: the first, a "real-life," essay-shaped object describing any aspect of virtual reality; the second, a virtual construction imitating any object they chose from "real life." I particularly enjoyed the football stadium built by the Chiefs cheerleader who was in that class; although both of the Malaysian students in the class came up with interesting virtual constructs: a Malay Visitors' Center (iconographic artifacts) and Nora's Cafe (authentic cuisine). But, even so, this class was, I suspect, the one which got the least out of its exploration of cyberspace. In addition to whatever shortcomings (and techno-pedagogical ambitions) I might have brought to that class (and its syllabus), it suffered, I think, from a serious case of Short Timer Blues on the part of its student members.

This course was offered solely to provide graduating seniors in the University's business school–aka: the (H. & R.) Bloch School of Business and Public Administration–a low-impact method of fulfilling the university's requirement for a "writing-intensive" course beyond sophomore composition. As such, it was scheduled in the Bloch building and in a regular, which is to say, "computer-less," classroom. It attracted, predictably enough, eight business-administration majors in their last, or next-to-last semesters at umkc: two Malays, one Nigerian, and five (for lack of a better term) "traditional"

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students–nice kids each and every one: charming, deferential to authority, open enough to any new classroom innovation which promised to reduce the number of books they needed to buy for the semester (see the syllabus included in the appendices to this paper), but Short Timers, never-the-less. Their interest in "writing," in or out of any given "cultural context" was, so far as I was able to determine, nil, pretty much across the board, although they ranged from "willing" to "eager" to acquire some new computer skills. What they mostly wanted out of my class, however, was (to get) Out Of The University.

The class met three days a week: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 9:00 a.m. To acquire at least some computer access, we "liberated," to borrow some terminology from my own long-departed undergraduate days, a couple of different computer labs on the campus for two of those class sessions each week. On Wednesdays we'd "sit in" at the Language Resource Center, with the kind permission of its director M. Jeanne Yanes; and we would connect via brand new Macintosh Centris (since renamed, "Quatra") 610s. On Fridays we would meet, with the cooperation of coordinator Shelia Honig, in the English Department's computer mediated composition classroom, where we would connect via vintage Macintosh LC iis.

On Mondays, that semester, there was no Internet access to be had anywhere on campus. That was the routinely scheduled "downtime" for maintenance of the university's erstwhile vax1 mainframe computer, our Internet server at that time. So we went ahead and met in the regularly scheduled classroom, thus providing the instructor an opportunity to strut around in front of the class and nurture his ego. I get kind of a kick out of marking up a traditional "black board," truth be told.

Floating from building to building through the week provided the class with about an hour and a half of in-class computer access each week. That's better than nothing, but the time was divided between two computing platforms which, although they were both Macintosh, were just different enough to complicate the students' lives. And these were students who, although they were sporting enough to meet in a different classroom each day of the week, were also altogether unwilling to log onto the Internet outside of class hours. Whether because I spent too much time guiding them through the intricacies of our multi-platform environment, or too little time stressing the need to take electronic texts as seriously as they took the printed texts they read and wrote for other classes; whether my assignments were too ambitious, or my deadlines too ambiguous; whether the Short Timer Blues were just too compelling, or Business Majors just don't *do* Humanities, I honestly do not know. But these students would not–and did not–work on this class outside of class, except during the last week of the semester, of course, when my class suddenly became the most important thing in their lives and the most rewarding experience they had ever encountered, and so on and so forth. You've heard it all before.

I never-the-less include, as appendices, examples of some of their projects. They didn't do too badly, given their minimal investments in these electronic enterprises. I think they might have done better–especially in terms of revision, editing, and final proofreading–if we had had more computer access on a single computing platform, and if they had been more at ease with word processing generally and Moo programming in particular in the first place. Having a better, or perhaps more sympathetic, teacher might also have helped, but hey, my other two classes did alright with the *same*

teacher, so I'm not going to beat myself up too badly over this.

The most polished virtual product of the semester, by contrast, was the mural created by my 225, "Composition II," class. It received lots of group attention and in-class revision time. You can see it for yourself by telnetting to *MOO.DU.ORG port 8888* , @go(-ing to) cultural (studies); then exiting west (w) to Minority Studies Hall. Be sure to "taste mural" and touch it, too. Here's how it took shape.

It was not on my syllabus. I was wandering around DU Moo one day, visiting with my friend and colleague there, Jeanne, the archwizardess, and we happened to wander into DU's Minority Studies Hall. The room description said there was a mural there which portrayed people of all races working together in harmony to build a peaceful world, or words to that effect.

I typed, "l [for (L)ook] mural."

And I received the response, "I see no mural here."

Jeanne explained that the mural was just part of the room description. I decided the hall deserved something more elaborate–perhaps a separate detail that would bear closer scrutiny; and so, with Jeanne's permission, I offered the virtual painting of such a thing to all three of my classes as an "extra credit project." I was really excited by the possibilities, but the only class which seemed to share that enthusiasm was my 225 class–perhaps because it was studying *Ceremony*, a novel with a culturally inclusive theme by a Native American storyteller (and one of my two or three all-time favorite books, I might add), perhaps because I had just handed back a stack of essays with comments indicating that much, much revision was in order across the board. We may never know.

In any case, we began the project with a class discussion of how the mural might convey the sense of people of all races working together etcetera etcetera. I had visions of workers and peasants in coveralls and kerchiefs wielding hammers and sickles in the best socialist realist tradition, something like what might have been at Rockefeller Center. They suggested a picnic. I grumbled. They suggested children playing games together, and people fishing from a bridge. I grumbled some more. They explained that the bridge would serve a metaphorical purpose. Not unlike a bridge in Silko's novel, they reminded me, it could act as a visual connecting structure for diverse cultures. I had to admit I liked their idea better.

I discussed several generic programmable moo "objects" we could use as a virtual canvas for the mural. "We could use the generic talking object," I said. "It could talk back to people who asked it questions that contained certain key words, kind of like my desk." The desk in my DU Moo office talks to people who visit me there. My students were unmoved. They wanted a more traditional mural, as virtual murals go. "Murals," I was politely informed, "don't talk back." We settled on the "generic detailable object" available for programming in DU's Technology Hall.

I solicited a list of activities to be portrayed in the mural from the class as a whole and recorded their suggestions on the "white board." When four or five activities had been listed, and class time was about over, I asked them to each choose one of those activities to consider between then and the next class period. When the class next met, I divided them into groups according to the activity they had chosen to consider in the interim: bridge-building, picnic preparing, water sports, land games. Then I left it

pretty much to them to divide the work among themselves within each of those groups. We devoted portions of the next couple or three class periods to meeting in those groups, until each group had produced a collection of "detail" texts describing the various components of its broader activity. Each of those details was then discussed and revised and edited by the class as a whole before being entered in the moo by the more computer-clueful of students in the class.

The result was, I think, pretty slick, as virtual murals go. Certainly, it is the best, if also the only, virtual mural I've ever seen. It has lots of details, and details within details. I like showing it off. But I realize that my product, as a composition instructor, is not text, or even "student text," and still less "students." It is, on my best days, in my best semesters, writers: that is, thoughtful communicators–people who think critically and share their thoughts carefully. I hope the process we used to produce the mural gave my students some practice in critical thinking and careful communication. I *know* they got a huge charge out of "publishing" a fairly high-profile "artistic" creation in a literally international medium. This was highly motivated text generation and revision.

But I also suspect that the "Composition I" students in my 110 class, without necessarily having much to "show" for it, as a group, learned the most. And I think that's because I told them the least. (See Tari Lin Fanderclai. "MUDs in Education: New Environments, New Pedagogies." *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine*. Vol. Two, No. One. January 1995. Page 8. Posted at: http://sunsite.unc.edu/cmc/mag/1995/jan/fanderclai.html)

"These are your character names and passwords," I wrote them, in e-mail sent to their various student accounts one evening. "Here's the address," I told them the next day, writing DU Moo's telnet address on the white board. "I want you to describe yourselves in this moo space and build homes for yourselves there. To learn how to do that, you'll have to solicit help from other users in the moo. Have a nice day."

One student, in particular, showed just how much such a *laissez faire* approach can yield. Her "Koda's Skywatch," and the virtual objects within it (especially her pet bat) are incredible. But for me the more remarkable thing is that she spent whole nights (as in dusk to dawn) meeting people from all over the world in order to:

learn how to program her space and objects,
write and enter both their apparent descriptions and descriptions for their verbs,
enter those descriptions,
seek out audiences (again from around the world),
share her text, and then
revise it in response to their (text-rendered) responses.

The creativity Robin Wilkinson honed in that space–as a student who had very little to say in class and one whose full repertoire of prior computer experience consisted of operating a cash register in a restaurant–is, to me, as a teacher of college-level composition, literally awesome.

Conclusions

I have no doubts about the viability of moo environments for composition instruction. They provide

teachers a powerful new medium for class discussion and text production and publication. To make the best use of this medium, classes need: **regular access,** on a consistent platform to a robust moo environment (I recommend DU Moo at Telnet *MOO.DU.ORG port 8888*); **savvy teachers,** familiar enough with moo programming to point students in the right direction (ie. the "help" menus) and comfortable enough with the creative process to let them travel that way largely unescorted; **willing students,** motivated to invest their own time and energies in learning the intricacies of an evolving, interactive medium.

Appendix A

English 403-WI/VOA / Writing in a Cultural Context / Fall 1994
MWF 9:00 -- 9:50 a.m. / 13 BSBPA*
Instructor: John LaRoe
Office: 223 Cockefair Hall / Hours: 10:00 -- 11:00 p.m., Mondays.

Required Texts & Materials:
You are not required to buy any textbook for this class, but there is much that you will be expected to read and otherwise engage (see below). Depending upon the level of access we obtain to a CD-rom reader or readers, you may be encouraged to acquire the CD-rom based Myst product published by Brøderbund. You are required to have an account on UMKC Vax1, a 9x12 manilla folder, and at least one 3.5" floppy high-density, double-sided computer diskette. I recommend you also acquire a writing guide (such as Bedford Handbook for Writers) and a guide to the Internet (such as The Internet Complete Reference). Browse the bookstores, find guides that strive to be comprehensive and with which you are comfortable.

Work Load:
You will be reading a lot of material which you will be locating on the Internet. You will post short (minimum 200 words in length) weekly commentaries on your reading and class discussions to a dedicated locally hosted UseNet Newsgroup.
One major essay (hard copy, minimum ten pages in length) will be composed and submitted in a series of drafts: Rough Draft (19 September), Revised Draft (26 September), Response Draft (10 October), Final Draft (17 October).
One virtual essay (multi-user interactive, minimum ten objects / details) will be constructed over the course of the semester; opened to the class for initial peer responses no later than 18 November and submitted for a grade no later than the last Friday on which the class meets.**

Other Important Stuff:
Grades on the two essays will determine 60 percent of the grade earned in

this class. The Newsgroup commentaries will determine another 20 percent. Class participation will determine the remaining 20 percent. It is difficult to imagine that students using all three of the "skips" permitted by the attendance policy described below will earn better than a "C" in class participation. You will be advised at mid-term to drop or stick with the class. If you are advised to drop, you should do so.
Class attendance is required. If you miss more than three classes, your grade will be lowered; if you miss more than six, you will be asked to drop the course. There are no excused absences other than those dictated by university policy.
PLAGIARISM: If I suspect and then prove plagiarism on your part, you will receive an "F" for the course and your dean will be notified. This is department policy.
TARDINESS: To cite a mentor of mine, Mickey Dyer, "It is unwise to annoy your instructor."

# # #
* The class may, depending upon enrollment and room availability, meet at other sites on the Volker Campus to obtain access to computing resources.
** The instructor may, at his discretion, approve an alternative multi-media interactive virtual construction.

Appendix B

main hold
The main hold of the Pequod is dark and damp. This seems to be where LaRoe's students store their works in progress.

Exits include: [hatch] to Pequod's main deck, [revolving_door] to Diversity University's Corner Pharmacy, [Sliding_Wooden_Door] to Malay Visitors' Center, [Airport_Road] to The Docks, [tunnel] to D.U.'s Stadium, [automatic_door] to Diversity University Food Center, [sliding_glass_door] to Neil's_Gym, [red_door] to Noraz Cafe

tunnel
D.U.'s Stadium
Walking onto the huge football field, you immediately see a huge sign that says, "WELCOME TO D.U. STADIUM." Thousands of fans screaming all around you. As you walk onto the field, you look around and see football players, lots of media, the D.U. mascot, and the cheerleaders. The weather is great and the excitement is high for a great game about to begin.
Exits include: [tunnel] to main hold

You see goal posts and uniform here.

l d.u. mascot

You see a big bulldog named "The D.U. Dog." He is about six feet tall and grey. D.U. Dog wears a red collar with little silver buttons on it around his neck and wears red baggy shorts with a red and white shirt. His name is printed in big letters on the back of his shirt. As the game begins, you see D.U. Dog doing his own groovy steps in the end zone. Everyone is cheering and laughing with him. As you are watching him groove, he comes running over to you and shakes his belly at you. You laugh and go on your merry way.

l players

You see lots of players on both sides of the field. On one side, they are in red and white. On the other side, they are in blue and white. You notice immediately how big these men are. Some of them are as big as 6'8", weighing 300+ lbs. You immediately feel incredibly small and could run into a hole. You watch the players run onto the field. They are yelling and seem to be very fired up.

l media

You see tons of people lined up and down both sides of the field. They either have cameras or video cameras in their hands. There are so many of them that you have a hard time even seeing the plays that are occurring on the field. Cords are following these people everywhere and you are trying to cheer on the fans without tripping. This is not so easy. Among these media people, is one you recognize every week. The Jumbo-Tron Man. You can see him for a better description.

l jumbo-tron man

You see a tall skinny man decked out in D.U. colors. He has a big video camera on his shoulders with a cord that follows him. He gets real close to you and yells "You're on!" You look up at the big T.V. screen and see your face on the Jumbo-Tron. You smile real big and yell "Go D.U.!" The Jumbo-Tron Man yells "OK," and you are off the screen.

l cheerleaders

You look around the field and see 36 girls all in red shiny sequined uniforms. They have sparkling red poms in their hands that are constantly being used. They are cheering and dancing throughout the entire game. You are curious about those red poms and wish that you could see one. There just happens to be a set on the ground in a corner. If you want to see them, look poms.

l uniform

It is generic, thus the description is generic as well.
Type "help clothing" for more info.
take uniform
You take uniform.
wear uniform
LaRoe slides into a teeny-weeny red sparkling sequined outfit
remove uniform
You remove uniform.
drop uniform
You drop uniform.

tunnel
main hold
The main hold of the Pequod is dark and damp. This seems to be where
LaRoe's students store their works in progress.

Exits include: [hatch] to Pequod's main deck, [revolving_door] to Diversity
University's Corner Pharmacy, [Sliding_Wooden_Door] to Malay Visitors'
Center, [Airport_Road] to The Docks, [tunnel] to D.U.'s Stadium,
[automatic_door] to Diversity University Food Center, [sliding_glass_door] to
Neil's_Gym, [red_door] to Noraz Cafe

red_door
Noraz Cafe
The walls are painted in light red. You see several *dining tables,
all covered with dark red table-clothes. At the left corner, close
to the wall, you see *food counter. Checking counter is located
near the entrance. The room is divided into smoking and non-smoking
section, which separated by a few distance away. Varities of food
are diplayed at the food counter. Some of them you might not find
familiar. But they sure looks delicious.*Melati is here to serve you.
Exits include: [pequod] to main hold
You see melati here.
l melati
A woman wearing M'sian trad Batik silk dress.She looks friendly & eager to
serve u.
"Hi melati
You say, "Hi melati"
melati says, "[to LaRoe] Hello there! Welcome to Noraz Cafe."

l menu

==========

%%NORAZ CAFE%%

Breakfast special
Curry-Puff
Egg-Sandwich
Lunch Special
Fried Rice
Chicken Rice
Fried Noodles
Dinner Special
Chicken or Beef Satay
Oily Rice
Beverages
Coke or Diet Coke
Hot Tea, Iced Tea
Hot Coffee, Iced Coffee

==========

l food counter

You see several kinds of food displayed at the food counter. Most of them you might not find familiar, but do not panic. Malaysian foods are made from good stuff only. And they not only smell good, but also taste very delicious. You can see *Fried Rice, *Chicken Rice, *Fried Noodles, *Chicken or Beef Satay, and *Oily Rice.

l fried rice

Shrimp, chicken, and beef are cut into small pieces, fry with onion, red hot chili sauce and some vegetables, mix with cooked rice.

l chicken rice

Rice which cooked with chicken soup, serve together with fried chicken, chili sauce, soy sauce and also chicken soup.

l fried noodles

Shrimp, chicken, and beef are cut into small pieces, fry with onion, red hot chili sauce and some vegetables, mix with spaghetti or noodles.

l oily rice

The rice are quite oily, that's why it is called oily rice. It is serve together with chicken curry. Also, cucumber which is peeled and cut into 3"x 0.5" pieces, mixed with onions, and vinegar.

l coke
You see a glass of Coke with lots of ice in it.
l diet coke
You see a glass of Diet Coke with lots of ice in it.
l chicken
Rice which cooked with chicken soup, serve together with fried chicken,
chili sauce, soy sauce and also chicken soup.
l egg-sandiwich
A typical egg-sandwich with lots of sliced tomatoes, onions,
and lettuce. It looks awfully delicious.
l curry-puff
A D-curve pastry or puff stuffed with diced-potatoes curry.
l iced coffee
You see a glass of deliciously looking iced coffee.
l hot coffee
You see a cup of hot coffee.

Portions of this paper were published previously as "What I Did *After* Summer Vacation" in the March 1995 issue of *ACW Connections*, the newsletter of the Alliance for Computers and Writing, posted in ACW's World Wide Web pages at http://prairie_island.ttu.edu/acw/acw.html.